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ABSTRACT

An initiative was undertaken to develop cooperation with higher vocational qualifications between two "new" universities that were formerly polytechnics: City University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (UNN) in England. The higher vocational qualifications were the Higher Diploma (HD) from CUHK and the Higher National Diploma (HND) from UNN, accredited by the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC). There were two aims: to obtain international recognition for the HD and to provide HD graduates with the opportunity of concurrent registration with BTEC to obtain the HND. Issues that were discussed in regard to implications for students/graduates, staff, and for CUHK included the considerable cost-benefit for the students. Assessment reporting requirements meant additional work for staff and students, although this would be offset against revenue and the less tangible benefits potentially available from international cooperation. It was apparent that there was a need to develop worldwide systems for recognition of higher vocational qualifications that represented capacity outcomes essential for social and economic development, particularly in developing countries. CUHK recommended that the offer of a Memorandum of Cooperation should not be accepted. (Contains 16 references.) (YLB)

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INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION WITH HIGHER VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS: AN EXAMPLE

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Abstract

The paper discusses an initiative to develop a Memorandum of Co-operation between the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (UNN), acting on behalf of the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC), in England, and the College of Higher Vocational Studies on behalf of City University of Hong Kong (CityU). Discussions started in July 1993 and the process concluded in November 1995.

The basis of co-operation is the comparability of the Higher Diploma (HD) at CityU, and the Higher National Diploma (HND) from UNN/BTEC. The aims were to obtain international recognition for the HD*(CityU)*, and to provide HD graduates with the opportunity of concurrent registration with BTEC to obtain the HND*(UNN)*.

This example identifies issues which are discussed in regard to implications for students/graduates, staff and for CityU. There is considerable cost-benefit for the students but there are assessment reporting requirements which mean additional work for staff and students. This is offset against revenue and less tangible benefits potentially available from international co-operation. This example also points to the need to develop world-wide systems for recognition of higher vocational qualifications which represent capability outcomes essential for social and economic development, particularly in developing countries.

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INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION WITH HIGHER VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS: AN EXAMPLE

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Introduction

This paper discusses an initiative by the author to develop co-operation with higher vocational qualifications between two 'new' universities which were formerly polytechnics: City University of Hong Kong (CityU) and the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (UNN) in England. The higher vocational qualifications are the Higher Diploma (HD) from CityU, and the Higher National Diploma (HND) from UNN, accredited by the Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC). There were two aims: the first to obtain international recognition for the HD*(CityU)*;and the second to provide HD graduates with the opportunity of concurrent registration with BTEC to obtain the HND*(UNN)*. The study might be of interest because of a number of considerations that are generalisable although context will clearly affect similar international co-operation between other institutions.

Formerly Newcastle Polytechnic, UNN became a university in September 1992 and offers a wide range of Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes as well as degree and postgraduate qualifications. With a similar profile and range of programmes and qualifications, City Polytechnic of Hong Kong became a university in November, 1994, and offers twelve Higher Diploma (HD) and one Diploma programmes. The HND (England) and the HD (Hong Kong) may be considered to be equivalent in standard to the North American associate degree. In England the HND is "generally accepted as pass degree equivalent" (BTEC, 1994a); internationally only England and Hong Kong offer a three year, full-time honours degree.

Acting on behalf of BTEC, UNN proposed a Memorandum of Co-operation the basis of which is the comparability of the Higher Diploma (HD) at CityU, and the Higher National Diploma (HND) from UNN/BTEC. Incorporating what is described as a BTEC franchise agreement, the Memorandum represented an offer of accreditation for ten HD programmes by BTEC, based on an assessment carried out by UNN, in May 1994. As part of the agreement, HD graduates from CityU would be eligible for a separate BTEC Higher National Diploma awarded by UNN. While requiring appropriate quality assurance arrangements, the Memorandum provided fully for the autonomy of CityU in regard to the Higher Diploma. The conditions for the award included payment of the BTEC registration fee and fulfilment of the Common Skills Assessment required by BTEC for all HNDs. All arrangements would be on a cost recovery basis with students opting to register at the beginning of the second year of the three year, full-time programme, or at the commencement of the part-time programme.

The first consideration is the current role of the Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC) which changed its international policy in 1990 and now works through universities in England (and Wales) in its relationships with higher education institutions overseas. The second consideration is the comparability of higher vocational qualification in terms of the National Qualifications Framework within which BTEC now operates (BTEC, 1994a). A third

consideration relates to the involvement of academic staff in establishing international co-operation which requires staff commitment..

Context

CityU was first established as City Polytechnic of Hong Kong (CPHK) on 1 January 1984 and, in ten years, has grown at an unprecedented rate to become, on 25 November 1991, the second largest university in Hong Kong with about 11,400 FTE students comprising 9,300 FT and 5,900 PT students studying for a wide range of qualifications from diploma to PhD (CPHK, 1994). The planned size of 13,050 FTE students will be reached in 1997-98.

During the period 1 January 1991 to 1 January 1995 there was considerable growth and change for CPHK/CityU and also change in the provision of higher vocational education in Hong Kong. Having introduced a Faculty structure in 1990, on 1 January 1994 CPHK established a vocational Faculty in the form of the College of Higher Vocational Studies (CHVS) to manage one Diploma programme and a range of Higher Diploma (HD) programmes which had previously been the responsibility of Faculty departments teaching degree programmes. The College currently offers one Diploma programme and 12 HD programmes with an enrolment of about 4,000 FTE students or 37% of the total enrolment of CityU (CHVS, 1995). Full details of the development of the College are given by Imrie, Lau, Lau (1995). The author was foundation Principal of the College from 1991 to July 1995.

On 25 November 1994, City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Polytechnic and Hong Kong Baptist College became universities making a total of six universities. These universities, together with Lingnan College, are managed on behalf of the Government of Hong Kong by the University & Polytechnic Grants Committee (UPGC) which became the University Grants Committee (UGC) on 26 November 1994.

The Vocational Training Council (VTC) is a separate jurisdiction and established the new Hong Kong Technical Colleges (Chai Wan and Tsing Yi) in time to enrol their students, in 1993-94 for the first time, for a range of HD programmes. In the same year the independent Open Learning Institute (OLI) of Hong Kong also started offering HD programmes part-time.

An important consideration for the Hong Kong context is that the UGC (1994) continued with a review of higher education and invited an exchange of 'further views on the development of higher education in Hong Kong', with particular reference to the following issues:

(a) provision of sub-degree programmes;
(b) demand for manpower at sub-degree level;
(c) quality assurance of sub-degree programmes;
(d) future development of sub-degree programmes; and
(e) feasibility of a credit unit system at sub-degree level.

The "provision of appropriate internationally recognized academic programmes" is part of the UGC's Mission Statement (UPGC, 1993). International recognition is increasingly important for both academic and professional qualifications, as the workforce becomes more mobile. Accreditation is the process of quality assurance which provides a basis for international

recognition but "does not determine institutional or programme quality. It has a crucial role in determining ... commitment to quality" (Millard, 1983).

This is discussed in regard to international recognition of vocational qualifications by Imrie (1995a; 1995b) and consideration needs to be given to two types of accreditation (HKIE, 1994):

Academic Accreditation

Any evaluation or assessment to determine whether the academic standards of an institution of higher education are comparable with internationally recognised standards. It includes course validation, course revalidation, institutional review and institutional accreditation.

Professional Accreditation

Evaluation and comparison of the academic standards of a degree or sub-degree and consideration of the appropriateness of the education component of that degree or sub-degree for professional practice.

For the latter, an example of international recognition is that of the Washington Accord whereby national professional accrediting bodies for degree-level engineering education agree to accept that their standards and procedures are generally equivalent and mutually recognised (Boyd, 1995). In June, 1995, the Hong Kong Institution of Engineers (HKIE) became the eighth national body to be a signatory.

In Europe there is no single body for the recognition of vocational qualifications. Imrie (1995a) notes that comparability of vocational training qualifications (EC, 1992) is a system that provides the necessary information so that the migrant worker can supply more information on his or her qualifications in order to find work in another Member State (of the European Community). The EC has agreed two Directives: the First Diploma Directive (89/48/EEC, Dec. 1988) is aimed at the recognition of diplomas for professional purposes; the Second Diploma Directive (92/51/EEC, June, 1992) complements the first and includes in the definition of 'diploma' qualifications accredited as NVQs (or SVQs) at Levels 3 and 4 of the UK National Framework of Vocational Qualifications. The HND (England) and the HD (hong Kong) correspond to Level 4.

Rationale and Advantages

Before setting out the processes of the case study it may be helpful to note the rationale and advantages of the proposed co-operation as set out for the information of academic staff and, in particular, for each of the Course Committees responsible for the three year, full-time (FT) HD courses under consideration.

<u>HD Students/Graduates</u>

- The BTEC HND is 'value added' for HD graduates; the HD(*CityU*) entitles students registered with BTEC, to be awarded the HND(*UNN*), on condition that students pay a registration fee and that they are reported as having passed the BTEC Common Skills Assessment.

- Registration is at the beginning of the second year for FT students (first year for PT students). The single registration fee is likely to be less than 5% of the total tuition fees. The fee will be set each year to cover all direct and indirect costs.

- BTEC qualifications are widely recognised by employers; also by professional bodies for exemptions for membership.

- The additional HND should give CityU HD graduates a competitive edge when seeking employment when Vocational Training Council HD graduates come on to the market in 1996. A major benefit of the BTEC HND is that it is effectively a 'passport' to honours degree level studies in the UK. In general, the HND is considered to be equivalent to a pass degree (as noted previously).

College Staff

- Professional linkages with UNN will provide enhanced opportunities for staff as well as students - including joint research projects, staff and student exchange, staff sabbatical leave, for example.

- The BTEC regulations require additional work from staff (and students) involved with the assessment of student performance in the relevant HD programmes. This will take the form of reporting, separately, specified skills performance for each student (already assessed in various second and third year modules). This information will be available to the students and will be of interest to potential employers.

- There will also be a requirement for notification regarding major changes to HD programmes and to quality assurance procedures.

City University

- CityU's validation autonomy for the HD will not be affected. HND assessment is carried out by UNN acting on behalf of BTEC. The HND is a BTEC award conferred by UNN. In 1994, UNN was one of 10% of UK universities which received two or more 'excellent' grades for teaching (business and law). UNN has a size and profile similar to CityU.

- UGC has recommended international recognition of qualifications. BTEC has international standing in UK, Europe, Asia and in Commonwealth countries. The BTEC HND is a form of benchmarking, i.e. a minimum standard for this type of qualification corresponding to Level 4 of the UK National Qualifications Framework. (NVQ4 is at pass degree level and may be a basis for introduction of an "Associate Degree" in the UK.)

The Initiating Meetings (July/August 1993)

The first meeting to develop co-operation between CityU and UNN took place in Germany, in July 1993, and was initiated by the author. The opportunity was provided by the Fifth International Conference on Assessing Quality in Higher Education in Bonn; four attended the

informal meeting and agreed that there was a sufficient basis of understanding and commitment to explore co-operation further.

The next phase involved a series of meetings to explore the implications of the franchising policies of the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC) and of BTEC. At the end of July, there was a follow-up meeting at UNN. It was agreed that the following information, for eleven CityU programmes, be sent to UNN:

- the definitive course documents;
- examination papers (and model answers);
- quality assurance arrangements;
- details of course advisory committees;
- external examiner reports;
- other information such as numbers of students enrolled.

After the meeting at UNN on 29 July, a crucial meeting was held with BTEC, in London on 2 August, with the Director, Quality Assurance and Control, and the International Affairs Co-ordinator who provided a note on 'Franchising of BTEC Programmes outside the United Kingdom'. The Director approved, in principle, the proposed arrangement whereby UNN would act under licence from BTEC to assess the HD programmes at CityU and develop a Memorandum of Co-operation.

Preliminary Stage (August 1993 to January 1994)

The preliminary stage took until 10 January 1994 when, after an exchange of correspondence, a letter (23.12.93) was received from UNN; the following extracts are significant:

> "You may take it from this present letter that we do wish in principle to proceed."
>
> "I have absolutely no doubts or reservations about the ability of City Polytechnic to deliver high quality programmes at the required level..... We would probably need to spend some time with staff in Hong Kong explaining our enhanced emphasis on personal skills development and the need to formally assess this development throughout the programme." *(from an annnex to the letter)*

The letter was acknowledged (14.1.94) with the advice that the College Board (5.1.94) had approved, in principle, the development of collaboration with UNN for BTEC recognition of D/HD courses. The "need to formally assess ... personal skills development" was to prove crucial. The UNN response (18.2.94) indicated:

> "It was also agreed that we would endeavour to complete all of the arrangements so that the BTEC courses could be launched in September of this year (1994)....."

This was crucial in that courses were referred to as BTEC courses and clarification was immediately sought (21.2.94) since there was no likelihood that HD courses which had always been internally validated by CPHK, would be permitted to be the responsibility of an external body such as BTEC. At a meeting in Hong Kong, on 28 February, a UNN representative

agreed to seek clarification regarding the basis of the BTEC arrangement: franchising or validation. In the notes of the meeting it was made clear

> "that validation was the preferred option whereby CPHK students would receive the HD from City University (in the future) and, as an optional extra, apply independently to BTEC for registration and conferment of the HND - on the basis of validation carried out by UNN on behalf of BTEC".

UNN followed up this matter with BTEC and eventually received a response from BTEC on 24 March, which was faxed to Hong Kong the same day with the desired position confirmed:

> "However, there is considerable scope for flexibility in the operation of the franchise such that, in practice, it could in effect be the arrangement envisaged in your letter. In particular, local 'ownership' could be reflected in documentation (including certification issued by you under the license agreement), but the University of Northumbria would have the normal responsibilities and accountability of a franchiser."

In this regard. the use of 'franchise', 'validation' and even 'competences' (BTEC, 1994b) has been potentially misleading for this form of international co-operation. The process is one of accreditation for international recognition. At this level (NVQ4) it is more appropriate to consider outcomes in terms of a capability curriculum (Flower, 1986) rather than competences. Issues of capability and quality in regard to the education and training of engineers, are discussed elsewhere (Imrie, 1989).

On this basis it was then appropriate to proceed with preparation of a draft Memorandum of Co-operation, also a proposal for a validation visit by UNN staff to Hong Kong in May. A letter (fax 30.2.94) from UNN set out the proposed programme for the visit of the validation panel "to accredit your portfolio of Higher Diplomas as HNDs of this University". The portfolio comprised the following:

HD Accountancy
HD Banking & Financial Services
HD Business Studies
HD English for Professional Communication
HD Public Administration and Management
D Social Work
HD Architectural Studies
HD Building
HD Building Services
HD Building Surveying
HD Computer Studies

The leader of the Validation Panel replied (fax 21.4.94) that he would be "meeting with the University Registrar in the very near future to progress the drafting of a Memorandum of Co-operation". The draft Memorandum of Co-operation was first received when the UNN panel visited CityU in May 1994.

The Assessment Stage (May 1994 to January 1995)

The validation visit took place over two day (30-31 May) and was designed to consider accrediting 11 Higher Diploma (HD) programmes within City Polytechnic of Hong Kong (CPHK) as BTEC HNDs under the UNN BTEC licence. The Report was received on 8 November.

The visit was satisfactory for all concerned and the panel recommended that UNN approve the ten HD programmes as BTEC HNDs under the University's BTEC Licence subject to specified conditions (see later). This recommendation was prefaced by the following remarks:

> "The panel were highly impressed with the physical environment, resources, academic standards and approaches to teaching and learning associated with the Higher Diploma programmes within the College."
>
> "The content of all 11 programmes and the level of knowledge and capability achieved by students in each is of at least HND standard; and in all cases constitutes a coherent programme of study worthy of accreditation at HND level."

The recommendation was for approval of ten programmes, the decision on the Diploma in Social Work being deferred because it was in the process of being revalidated; also structures/qualifications in social work, in the UK, were undergoing a major review. In retrospect, more time should have been spent on clarification of the Common Skills Assessment requirement (see later).

The revised Validation Report was not received until 8 November and was duly submitted to the College Board which, with minor accuracy amendments, approved the Report and, in principle, the development of collaboration with UNN for BTEC recognition of HD/D courses. The amendments were notified to UNN and the first aim had been achieved: an assessment report which provided international recognition of the quality and standard of the majority (10/12) of CityU's full-time HD programmes, with the standard at least that of the BTEC HND.

Memorandum of Co-operation Stage (May 1994 to March 1995)

The UNN Validation Report had specified the following conditions:

1. A formal agreement, in the form of a "memorandum of co-operation" should be agreed between CPHK and the University prior to the registration of the first group of students.

2. CPHK must identify, for each programme, mechanisms for the allocation of 7 Common Skills grades to students at the end of the third year of the programme.

3. Other than "language" units, ALL course units are taught and assessed in English.

Condition 1 specified a formal agreement and the first draft of the Memorandum of Co-operation was prepared during the Validation Visit, discussed and amendments agreed. At UNN the revised Memorandum was then passed to the Registrar and the Head of the Legal

Services Unit for approval; the proposed Memorandum eventually reaching CityU on 21 October - some five months later. At the same time details of proposed fees were also received based on the number of students registering.

Essentially, the one-off registration fee would have three components: a fixed BTEC fee; a UNN cost for annual moderation; and a College cost to cover extra work involved for the BTEC Common Skills Assessment. In round numbers (for 1995) the first two components amounted to $1800 and, after consultation with the HD Course Leaders, it was agreed that an additional $1000 would meet the perceived interests of the staff, i.e. a total fee of $2800.

For 1995/96, the HD registration fee for full-time students was HK$23,060; by the time the student completed the three year programme, the total fees would be about HK$84,000, i.e. the registration fee was 3.3%. All of the student representatives consulted were enthusiastic about the opportunity which would basically provide them with two qualifications for the price of one, i.e. HD(*CityU*) and HND(*UNN*). Registration would be optional at the beginning of the second year of the three year HD for comparability with the two year HND.

This left one outstanding difficulty as far as the staff were concerned - the extra work required for the Common Skills assessment. The decision to proceed would be made by each of the ten HD Course Committees (which included student representatives) chaired by Course Leaders. Comment had also been made by some Course Leaders that the standing of the HD would be adversely affected by association with the perceived lower level of the BTEC HND.

Common Skills Assessment (CSA)

On request, CSA information was then provided by UNN giving details and examples of procedures used at UNN for the seven skill areas specified by BTEC:

> managing and developing self; working with and relating to others; communicating; managing tasks and solving problems; applying numeracy; applying technology; applying design and creativity.

On 24 November 1994, a meeting was held with Course Leaders to discuss the proposed Memorandum of Co-operation, and the main objection to the CSA requirement seemed to be 'the additional workload (without remuneration) imposed on staff'. Underlying this concern were two factors: the time elapsed (about 6 months) since the Course Leaders had met with the UNN team; and the workload of the staff approaching the end of a busy semester in a year in which the College budget had been adversely affected by budget allocation.

With the former, the notes of the meeting with Course Leaders (30 May 1994) showed that CSA had been discussed but not the procedural or workload implications. Clarification was sought and UNN responded (10 January 1995) stressing that "any good Common Skills system should place emphasis for the identification, recording and development of Common Skills firmly in the hands of the student, and not the member of academic staff". UNN advised that "there is no necessity to undertake any additional assessment to that which already takes place" and emphasised:

> "However, as long as you provide for the development of competence in all of the seven skills areas, it is entirely at your discretion where those opportunities will be provided, and you would only need to inform (UNN) as a matter of information, rather than an issue of approval."

A third meeting of Course Leaders was held on 20 January and there was further discussion about the discretion to minimise the staff workload; also the distribution of the College's component of the registration fee which, basically, would follow the students. There seemed to be clear understanding that CSA was, in effect, a reporting requirement of outcomes identified by students and approved by staff.

City University

There is no doubt that the proposed Memorandum of Co-operation represented an excellent opportunity for CityU's HD students and graduates; also for College staff in regard to collaboration. With the confirmation of the Validation Report, international recognition of the HD would continue under the provisions of the Memorandum. It should be noted that there had always been a concern that CityU might somehow relinquish self-accreditation for the HD. This was never in question but, as noted earlier, the BTEC use of 'franchise' was inappropriate in this regard. The benefits to CityU could not readily be estimated but the Memorandum would ensure external recognition of the standing and standard of the HND for

- UGC's introduction of Teaching and Learning Quality Process Audits in 1996;

- the possible introduction of a vocational qualifications framework as an outcome of the UGC's review of sub-degree education as part of its review of higher education, to be reported by the end of 1995;

- the eventual introduction of a credit accumulation and transfer system with articulation between sub-degree and degree levels - the latter possibly moving to a four year honours degree.

In the spirit of collegiality, it is entirely appropriate that the decision be made by the Course Committees. As noted by Elton (1995) collegiality is "too cumbersome for these fast moving times, but this should apply only to policy execution, not to policy making". The crucial issue seemed to be that of introducing and operating a system of reporting the outcomes of common skills assessment - assessment which is already taking place. Common skills are skills which are and should be common, i.e. evident in the capability of HND/HD graduates. These are skills expected and increasingly required by employers. As noted earlier, these are skills which are more than competences, capability being inclusive of competence, co-operation, creativity and cope-ability (Flower, 1986).

Conclusion and Comment

All of the Course Committees decided that they did not wish to accept the offer of a Memorandum of Co-operation which would provide students with opportunity for registration for a BTEC HND awarded by the University of Northumbria at Newcastle. The main issue was that of the extra work involved for staff and students, for compliance with BTEC's Common Skills Assessment (CSA) requirements - despite a fee component to cover administration costs and the confirmation that the CSA requirements would involve reporting of existing assessment and not additional assessment by staff.

The following report is an example of conclusions reached by Course Committees:

> "I raised the issue of the BTEC HND at the recent Course Committee. After some discussion, the student members suggested that as the staff would be involved in some extra work they should make the decision. I have now consulted the staff and only 1 was in favour of offering HND. One of the reasons for the no vote was that staff felt that by linking HND with HD it might lower the standing of our HD. For example, currently where British Universities now accept our HD graduates for Master's courses, they may not do so in future, if they see it as being equivalent to an HND qualification."

The issue that 'linking HND with HD might lower the standing of our HD' is somewhat perplexing. Some three years ago, issues of standing and standard of the HD had been addressed and now form part of the College's Information Leaflets (CHVS, 1995). This had established a minimum standard equivalence of HD and HND in terms of the National Qualifications Framework. Further, it had been clearly confirmed that the arrangement would enable HD graduates to obtain an additional qualification conferred by another university. Subsequently, after a more detailed form of this paper was presented at an international conference (Imrie, 1995b), a Canadian reflected the views of some American colleagues that they agreed with the outcome but "if the university had been Oxford or Cambridge it might have been different"!

Reduction of delays in responses from UNN which lengthened the period between the validation visit and the point of decision, might have made a difference to the outcome; also fuller discussion of the Common Skills Assessment during the validation visit. A hiatus effect was caused by these delays due to factors such as: a lost disk; a broken leg; legal clarifications; liaison with BTEC; and 'hand-off' effects due to the requirement for a range of people to be involved.

Then there is the question of obtaining student opinion. This was obtained solely through student representatives particularly those who were members of the Course Committees. Student representatives cannot always attend meetings and there may also be discontinuity for the students acting as representatives over the protracted period of this discussion. A student vote might have led to a different outcome but staff are also important stakeholders in that they woul provide ongoing continuity of co-operation with UNN.

International recognition is still part of the University Grants Committee's mission and the majority of City University's Higher Diploma programmes have had that recognition as a result of the BTEC/UNN validation visit. For all diplomas which come under the jurisdiction of the

Vocational Training Council (VTC), there is an ongoing formal agreement with City and Guilds (UK) for recognition.

There had been full consultation in the College and the Course Committees had recommended that the offer of a Memorandum of Co-operation should not be accepted. This recommendation was conveyed to the College Board at its meeting on 17 May 1995. Unexpectedly, the student members reported strong student support for the opportunity to register for the UNN Higher National Diploma. It was agreed that the matter should 'lie on the table' until the next meeting for which the student members would prepare a submission. UNN and BTEC were informed. Eventually there was no submission and the College Board, meeting on 8 November under a new Principal, finally decided not to proceed with the proposed collaboration.

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